

Suspended Ohio middle school student crushed to death in homeless shelter elevator

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Alexa France, a 12-year-old middle school student, died on May 8 after being asphyxiated in an elevator accident at St. Vincents homeless shelter in Dayton, Ohio.

Alexa had been suspended from Kettering Middle School and was working at the shelter folding clothes in the laundry. School administrators had suggested to Alexa's parents that she work at the shelter as a form of discipline during her suspension, as no provisions exist for any supervision once a student is suspended from school.

The accident occurred when Alexa was trapped in a four-inch space between the elevator's heavy outer door and its inner gate. The outer door swings open like a car door and shuts automatically. The inner gate slides horizontally. Alexa, who weighed 100 pounds, was pinned against the inner gate and asphyxiated when the elevator moved and compressed her against the wall.

Since the accident school officials have refused to comment on their policy of having young children working at shelters. St. Vincents is located in downtown Dayton, in a dangerous area with a high crime rate. Apparently this practice of sending suspended students to shelters is common not only for Kettering Middle School, but for schools throughout the greater Dayton area.

Another student, 13-year-old Samuel Knight, reported that he worked at the same shelter after being suspended from West Corrollton Middle School for fighting. At the school's suggestion to his parents, Samuel worked at the shelter for three days.

One of his duties was to take bins of newly washed towels from the basement laundry room to the first floor. Samuel said shelter workers told him to use the elevator, but to be very careful because the doors are heavy and will spring back on you. On several

occasions the outer door of the elevator swung back, once leaving a bruise on Samuel's leg. Reports made about the incident were taken very lightly, with Samuel simply being told to be more careful.

Alexa's tragic death has provoked considerable outrage from parents throughout the greater Dayton area. Many are asking how a 12-year-old, 100-pound girl could be told to work when, according to law, you must be 16 to hold down a legal job during school hours.

An examination of the conditions leading up to this tragedy makes clear that the death of this young child was not an unavoidable accident, but the outcome of a social policy where the needs of major corporations and a favorable business environment are placed above those of the working class and young people.

Public schools are being continuously drained of necessary funds and have been forced to cut all in-school supervision programs along with art instruction, some sports and other courses vital to young people receiving an all-rounded education.

Just recently in the city of Dayton, over the objections of school officials, General Motors was given a \$10 million tax abatement by the city government for the construction of a new \$100 million engine plant. Such repeated tax breaks, doled out to keep corporations in the city, are having a devastating effect on all of the social services.

Another issue arising from Alexa's death is the serious decline in safety standards that has taken place. The Ohio Department of Commerce and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have no regulations on who is qualified to run a freight elevator.

The elevator where Alexa was crushed to death had a permit stating it was a freight elevator. But by law, a

sign must be posted stating: “Not a Passenger Elevator,” and this sign was missing. Moreover, state inspectors' records began listing the elevator as a passenger elevator in 1989 through to the present. When questioned, Ohio authorities said the switch on the records was an “administrative error” that they were unable to explain.



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